

Congressman John Barrow (GA-12) released the following statement in response to the Federal Trade Commission's decision to launch a formal antitrust investigation into Google's business practices:

“While anti-competitive practices stifle the business world from doing what they do best, the folks that suffer the most are consumers, who miss out on new and innovative products that will only come about from healthy competition in the marketplace. I applaud the FTC for working to bring these issues to light and am hopeful these hearings will reveal the full extent of Google's violations. At the same time, I will continue working to see that Google is also held accountable for their repeated breaches of consumer trust.”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Congressman Barrow has been a staunch advocate of protecting personal data and holding companies accountable when they violate the public's trust.

Barrow recently joined the Congressional Privacy Caucus, a bipartisan group of members of Congress dedicated to protecting citizens' confidential information in the face of new challenges posed by the information age.

“As more and more information travels along the information superhighway, consumers are increasingly at risk that their private, personal information will end up in the wrong hands. Identity theft has increased nearly 12 percent annually over the last few years, and recent news reports have exposed how some major Internet companies have inappropriately obtained consumers' personal data without their authorization,” said Congressman Barrow. “Unless we know how our private information is being used and are educated about ways to protect our data, this trend will only get worse. I look forward to working with the members of the Privacy Caucus and the Energy and Commerce Committee to make sure that private information stays private.”

For the 11th consecutive year, consumers have registered more complaints with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) about identity fraud than any other issue (Source: FTC Newsletter, March 2011).

Call for Investigative Hearings

Congressman Barrow recently sent a letter to Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Fred Upton (R-MI6) and Ranking Member Henry Waxman (D-CA30) calling on them to launch investigative hearings into Google's consumer privacy standards. Congressman Barrow's letter states that, "While I have no doubt that Internet search technology has made our online experiences more fruitful, we can't afford to allow continued advances in Internet functions to invade our online privacy."

In calling for the hearings, Barrow goes on to point out that, "Due to the frequency of these privacy breaches, and the handling of personal data by Google, it is of the utmost importance that the Committee hold an investigative hearing on Google's privacy standards."

Other Recent Actions

Barrow's efforts recently led to an FTC settlement regarding privacy breaches committed by Google when launching their social networking tool "Google Buzz."

In 2010, Barrow sent a bipartisan letter to the FTC requesting that they investigate whether Google's "Google Buzz" breached online consumer privacy and trust by automatically using consumers' address books to create contact lists for the Buzz program, and then publicly disclosing the names of these private contacts by posting this information online. As was widely reported at the time, this automatic process – which was done without the users' permission or intent – could have inadvertently disclosed contacts and information that users believed to be private, such as conversations with other Google users, consumers' medical histories, political views, locations, and other information.

As a result, Google recently announced that it had reached a settlement agreement with the FTC, which "bars the company from future privacy misrepresentations, requires it to implement a comprehensive privacy program, and calls for regular, independent privacy audits for the next 20 years." This is the first time an FTC settlement order has required a company to implement a comprehensive privacy program to protect the privacy of consumers' information." (Source: FTC Press Release, March 2011).

In addition, Congressman Barrow is working to hold Google accountable for the unauthorized collection of private consumer data it acquired while building its Street View mapping program. In February, Congressman Barrow joined with Republican Congressman Mike Rogers (MI-8) and sent a letter to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) seeking a full investigation of this breach.

Google announced last May that the vehicles used to collect visual data for its Street View mapping program had gathered private communications from unsecured consumer Wi-Fi networks over a three year period.

Since then, investigations by officials overseas have revealed that these captured communications included hundreds of thousands of emails, email addresses, instant messages, URLs, usernames and passwords, names, residential telephone numbers and addresses, and in one case a list of the names of people suffering from certain medical conditions, along with their telephone numbers and addresses.

"Google owes the folks who use their service an explanation of how this security breach was allowed to take place and what steps they are taking to ensure something like this never happens again," Congressman Barrow has said.

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